Faith and Doubt
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A parent, it is often said, is only as happy as his or her least happy child. A lot of people have said that, but I believe the late Madeleine L'Engle was first. She was an author of wonderful children's books, an essayist, an Episcopalian who served as volunteer librarian at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City, a mother and a grandmother. She knew what she was talking about. You are only as happy as your least happy child. It is true, I'm afraid, even after your children become adults. You still worry and fret, your heart aches when their heart aches. When they are in trouble, you feel it deeply, personally. It's bigger than parenting actually. C.S. Lewis wrote, "If you give your heart to anyone or anything it will surely be broken." Love makes us vulnerable. They go together – love and vulnerability. And all your life you are only as happy as your least happy child.

The story of the man who brought his son to Jesus one day, because the boy was sick, has personal meaning for me. Every time I read it, I am transported back in time when a six-week-old granddaughter was in Children's Memorial Hospital. Her parents brought her there because she was born with a tiny hole in her heart and she needed an operation. I will never forget the day of her surgery. Along with her father, my son, his wife, Sue, my wife, a world class grandmother, assorted aunts and uncles. I learned – we all learned - an important lesson about the limits of our ability to protect our dear ones from harm. And we learned about our own vulnerability.

After open-heart surgery an infant is virtually paralyzed by anesthesia to allow healing to happen. For days, which became weeks, all we could do was stand by her crib and watch the machines and tubes and wires and monitors keep her alive. All you can do is trust that the physicians and nurses know what they are doing, and, of course, pray – which I suspect anyone who has been in that situation does a lot of whether they have a lot of faith or a little faith, or no faith. How much faith you have doesn't seem to matter. You pray because that is all you can do.

She recovered, thanks be to God. She is a lively, energetic eight-year-old, plays soccer, takes Irish dance lessons and came in second in her age group in an Irish Dancing contest (now I know this is becoming an exercise in grandparental bragging – but, if you are a grandparent, you know there are some things over which you have no control). Gabriella Grace – Ella – every time I see her I say, "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."

One more vignette. Ella is a model student apparently, completes all her assignments, never steps out of line, follows all the rules. So when she does something slightly out of order, it is a big deal and the whole family hears about it. Last spring, her mother was trying to explain “April Fools” to Ella. After a while Ella returned to the kitchen and told her mother that she wanted to pull an “April Fools” trick on her older sister, Kate, 10. And she had thought about it and had come up with the perfect trick. “What are you going to do, sweetie?” her mother asked, and Ella said, “I’m going to move her bookmark.”

Gabriella Grace. One day a father brought his son to see Jesus. Apparently the boy had a form of epilepsy and suffered from epileptic seizures. When it happened, in the ancient world, it was terrifying. It was generally believed that the person was demon-possessed. Physicians treat and manage it today, but in that world it was frightening and heart-breaking. I envision a handsome, happy, carefree little boy, who did all the things little boys do: ran everywhere, never walked, loved to play with his friends, got dirty; if there was mud anywhere, found it and played in it, had trouble paying attention to anything for very long, and asked questions, non-stop. But then, without warning his face contorts, his eyes roll back, he becomes rigid, falls down, grinds his teeth and foams at the his mouth. His friends are terrified and run away. Even adults are frightened. Only his parents kneel down and hold him until the seizure subsides. That is how I see the father, on his knees, holding his little boy in his arms, and as the seizure slowly loosens its grip, stroking his face, wiping his mouth, speaking gently, “It’s alright now, son, It’s alright.” And inside he knows it’s not alright and experiences again the painful reality of his own powerlessness. His heart is broken.

So one day he brought his son to Jesus. My guess is that these parents have tried everything, taken him to physicians, purchased medicine, tried special cures. When the man hears that a teacher from Nazareth with a growing reputation as a miracle worker and healer is in the vicinity, he gathers up his son and walks for miles and brings him to Jesus.

“Teacher…my son…has a spirit – it dashes him down, makes him rigid and unable to speak, he grinds his teeth and foams.” And as he’s speaking it happens. The boy becomes rigid and falls down in front of Jesus. The man falls to his knees, holds his son in his arms, looks up and says, “If you are able to do anything, have pity and help us.” Notice the uncertainty. He has been disappointed so many times. “If you are able.” There’s a lot of doubt in that.

Jesus responds, “Anything is possible for one who believes.”

So the man says what he has to say to help his son. “I believe.” And then he adds what I think is one of the most important statements in the Bible, an

absolutely honest, brave, confession – “help my unbelief.” “I believe; help my unbelief.”

I think we all understand that. I suspect most of us live most of the time somewhere between belief and unbelief. This man is not sure. Some days he believes; other days he doesn’t. He doesn’t bring religious credentials to Jesus. He brings what he has – his belief and unbelief, his poor faith and nagging doubt, and his love for his son. And it is enough. Jesus heals the little boy.

Now, you can go one of two directions at this point. You can focus on the healing. You can wonder about miracles; did they really happen and how did they happen? You can ask the vexing question of why some people pray for a miracle and get one, while others pray for a healing and it doesn’t happen.

You can stand, as I did, by the hospital bed of a six-week-old, attached to all those machines and blinking monitors, not moving except for the rhythmic moving of her tiny chest, responding to the ventilator. And then watch, astonished, as a miracle of healing begins to happen, as she moves a finger, a toe, begins to squirm, opens her eyes and looks around, and then breathe on her own, and finally makes a lonely sound. And my guess is that even the most confirmed skeptic would find himself mumbling “thank you” – and considering the use of the would “miracle.”

But what really intrigues me, and what I believe is the point here, and the word for us in this text, is that mixture of belief and unbelief expressed by a loving, grateful father.

Douglas John Hall is a distinguished Canadian theologian who taught for years at McGill University in Montreal. He has become one of the most prominent and helpful analysts of what has happened and what is happening to the Christian Faith and the Christian Church in our time. Christian faith, Hall maintains, has come to mean intellectual certainty. Christianity is a list of ideas about God and Jesus that are absolutely and universally true: that to be a Christian is to understand those ideas, to believe them to be true and to adopt them as one’s own. It is to stand every Sunday and recite a catalog of those ideas in the Apostles’ Creed. Hall thinks that popular motion of faith as intellectual acceptance of a list of ideas is not only not a very good definition, but an actual deterrent to faith for many people, particularly us modern, or post-modern people.

The problem is that if faith is certainty there is no room for doubt. In fact, if faith is certainty, then doubt is incompatible with faith, the opposite of faith. And, at that point, a lot of people start leaving the church and religion in general, good, honest, lively people, who find themselves doubting.

There is another way. There is a way of understanding that questions and doubting are a healthy part of an honest faith, not its opposite. In fact,

Spanish philosopher Umamuno said that faith without doubt is dead. And Professor Hall reminds readers that one of Martin Luther's favorite Bible texts was, "now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

Absolute certainty and the absence of doubt can transform religion into a narrow, rigid and dangerous ideology. In her book, The Battle for God, Karen Armstrong observes that "There is a problem today in most religions – I call it the problem of certitude."

The young men who strap explosives around their waist and walk into a crowded mosque and blow up themselves and twenty of their countrymen are absolutely certain that they have the one universal absolute truth, and that anyone who deviates or doubts is a heretic and infidel that does not deserve to live.

No religion has a monopoly on fundamentalist certainty. Periods of our own Christian history are marked by the tragedy of religious leaders convincing political leaders that doubt and deviation from the Truth warrants burning at the stake.

There is another way. Wendell Berry is a Kentucky farmer who writes elegant poetry and essays and novels. he is an unconventional Christian, attends the local Baptist Church occasionally with his wife, but mostly spends Sunday morning walking over the hills and countryside and then coming home to write what he calls "Sabbath Poems." I heard him one time talk about church and why he keeps it at arm's length. The trouble, Berry says, is that these young preachers, fresh out of seminary, think they know too much. They know what ails the world, what is always right and always wrong, no questions asked, who's in and who's out. And Kentucky farmers, who plough and sow and harvest, who tend cattle and feed and birth and milk – know about mystery, about the quiet mystery of nature and God's creation, and when the preacher tells them that world is a fallen, sinful, terrible place – they simply stop listening. They know better.

Berry was invited to speak one time at a Baptist Theological Seminary and he said that while many Christian are exceedingly confident about what God likes and doesn't like, he does not share that confidence. The speech is in a volume of essays Berry titled, interestingly, The Way of Ignorance. What we need most – theologically, religiously, politically, is a little less certainty, what I learned from Joseph Sittler who taught at the University of Chicago, to call "theological modesty before the great mystery of God."

If faith is not certainty, then what is it? may I propose that faith is better defined as trust, trust in God and God's love which we have seen and experienced in Jesus Christ, God's son. It was a turning point in my own experience when I finally got it: when I learned that the word "Creed" – these compendia of Christian ideas – that the word itself comes from the

Latin Credo – and Credo comes from the Latin word heart. So “I believe” means “I set my heart.” Not so much “I know these ideas are the final truth,” but “I give my heart to the reality these words are trying to express, the mystery and majesty of God and God’s love.”

The man who loved his son so much he brought him to Jesus, and who was brave and honest enough to express his uncertainty, gives us a whole new definition of faith. Faith and doubt are not opposites. In fact they belong together.

Faith, according to Jesus, is trusting God in spite of our doubt. Faith is the act, the getting up and moving, bringing the boy to Jesus. Faith is taking the first steps, back to church, to the AA meeting, to reach out in forgiveness. It is taking an existential risk, betting on the mercy and love and healing power of God.

I know people leave church, stay away from church, because they can’t, in conscience, say every sentence of the creed: because they have questions and doubts about this doctrine or that. And so they think they don’t belong. And I simply want to remind you, if you are in that number, that Jesus never asked his followers to agree to a list of theological assertions, never asked anyone to sign a list of fundamentals. He invited people to walk with him and follow him and trust him with their lives, and their deaths. There was no test, no doctrinal examination required.

If you wonder if you belong in this business with all your questions and uncertainty, please hear this little story of a man whose unbelief was in no way a barrier, a man who brought to Jesus his love for his son, and it was enough.

Presbyterians don’t sing the old hymn much because it is identified with tent meetings and evangelistic crusades and altar calls, and all of that makes Presbyterians uncomfortable. But I still love it because of what it says about that wonderful father bringing his dear son to Jesus in spite of his unbelief: I love it for what it says about you and me –

Just as I am, though tossed about
with many a conflict, many a doubt,
Fightings and fears, within, without,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Amen.